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ANIMAL EMOTIONS

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ABSTRACT

Recent work in the area of ethics and animals suggests that it is philosophically legitimate to ascribe emotions to nonhuman animals. Furthermore, it is sometimes argued that emotionality is a morally relevant psychological state shared by humans and nonhumans. What is missing from the philosophical literature that makes reference to emotions in nonhuman animals is an attempt to clarify and defend some particular account of the nature of emotion, and the role that emotions play in a characterization of *human* nature. I argue in this paper that some analyses of emotion are more credible than others. Because this is so, the thesis that humans and nonhumans share emotions may well be a more difficult case to make than has been recognized thus far.

ANIMAL EMOTION

The metaphors we use to describe our emotional states presuppose that emotions are irrational, bodily, and often beyond our control. We say that we are “paralyzed by fear,” “overwhelmed with sadness,” and that we “fall in love.” We are commended for remaining “cool and calm” in a crisis, and we vent our anger by “letting off steam.” Robert Solomon (1990) refers to these metaphors as the “hydraulic image” of the human psyche,

comparing our emotional states to a boiler system filled with volatile, super-heated steam which is sometimes contained, other times explosive. “Animal emotion” is yet another metaphor we use to characterize the emotions as unruly, bodily, and irrational. These metaphors, I believe, reflect some unexamined assumptions about the distinction between emotionality and rationality. The presumed irrationality of the emotions obscures the thesis that I wish to examine here that animals, literally, have emotions.

The characterization of the emotions as irrational and bodily has historical antecedents. In Plato’s *Apology* (35b9-c2), Socrates rejects an emotional appeal to the jury in favor of instruction. And in the *Republic* (604a10-b4, 605b8), feelings are described as unintelligent insofar as they contribute to the destruction of the capacity to reason well. Emotional response involves some bodily sensation and disturbs the ability to judge correctly, but emotions are also distinguished from bodily sensations like hunger, thirst, tickles, and itches. These emotional responses are still obedient to reasoned reflection.

Descartes’ analysis of the passions in *The Passions of the Soul* (Article XXXVI) makes essential reference to physical events occurring in the body. An account of fear, for example, is described as an agitation of the body where the motions of animal spirits rush from the pores of the brain to the legs in preparation for flight. But Descartes is also willing to say that certain passions require the power of the soul. This is so, for example, when courage is characterized as the capacity to consider reasons why the peril is not great, or when it is judged that there is more security in defending oneself than fleeing (Descartes 1978, Art. XLVI). The activity of the will is further described as resisting the effects and dispositions of the body. So if anger causes us to strike another, the will can usually hold it back (Descartes 1978, Art. XLVI). Hence, for Descartes, when the passions are construed as bodily activities, they are subject to control by other more highly cognitive faculties.

For Plato and Descartes, the attribution of emotion to animals is one way of marking off animals from humans as qualitatively distinct in their mental capacities.¹ Animals lack an essential property of humanness which is either described as a rational soul or an intellectual faculty of the mind.² This is so, in part, because each subscribes to a mind-body dualism that distinguishes rationality and intellect from bodily states, sensations, and the appetites, passions, or emotions. On this view, to say that animals have

emotion commits one to claiming that animals fail to have the much revered cognitive states such as judgment, knowledge, certainty, and the like. If animals merely have emotional states, or fail to have the rationality that controls these states, then animals and humans are essentially different.

In contrast, much of the recent philosophical dialogue about ethics and animals implies that rationality, by itself, is not a useful criterion for inclusion in the moral sphere. So the attribution of emotions to animals has come to be evidence—not that animals and humans are essentially different—but that animals and humans are essentially similar.

For example, Tom Regan (1983) includes emotionality as one among other mental capacities, such as perception, memory, desire, and belief that are sufficient for something's being a subject-of-a-life. Adult mammals over the age of one year, irrespective of their ability to engage in reasoning that is highly cognitive, are subjects-of-a-life. And, according to Regan, having this property is sufficient for a thing to have certain moral rights, such as the right not to be harmed (Regan 1983, 242).

Peter Singer (1989) applies a moral principle of equal consideration to animals. He supposes but does not argue for the view that animals have emotions and desires, a prerequisite for having interests at all.

Philosophers S. F. Sapontzis (1987) and Lawrence Johnson (1983) are interested in showing that animals share with humans a kind of moral agency by virtue of their capacity to behave compassionately and sympathetically. For Sapontzis, emotions in animals can be “read off” from their behavior. And if an animal's behavior sufficiently resembles paradigm cases of courageous, kind, or responsible action, then that animal is capable of moral action (Sapontzis 1987, 27–28). Johnson suggests that a monkey may display compassion for another monkey, and we judge this to be so when monkeys act so as not to permit injury to other monkeys (Johnson 1983, 56).

In *When Elephants Weep: The Emotional Lives of Animals*, authors Jeffrey Masson and Susan McCarthy (1995) devote themselves to documenting a variety of animal behavior in order to argue that animals share emotionality with humans. The thesis that animals have emotions is used by the authors to advance a moral argument against animal experimentation and the consumption of animals for food.

What is missing from the literature that makes reference to emotions in animals is an attempt to clarify and defend some particular account of the nature of emotion, and the role that emotions play in a characteriza-

tion of human nature. I argue in this essay that some philosophical analyses of emotion are more credible than others. Because this is so, the thesis that animals have emotions may well be a more difficult case to make than has been recognized thus far.

Consider a particular analysis of emotions, one that characterizes emotions as feelings. In *When Elephants Weep: The Emotional Lives of Animals*, Masson and McCarthy endorse the following account of emotion:

This book defines ‘emotions’ as subjective experiences, as what people refer to when they say “I feel sad,” or “I am happy,” or “I am disappointed,” or “I miss my children.” An emotion is not distinguished from a feeling, a passion, a sentiment, or what scientists call “affect.” ‘Mood’ refers to a feeling that lasts for some protracted time. These words refer simply to inner feeling states, to something that is felt. (Masson and McCarthy 1995, 3)

Later in this chapter the authors characterize emotions as being private and “never entirely available to another.” Feelings are a part of the “inner life” of a person, and the particularity of those feelings escapes exact scientific scrutiny, remaining ultimately mysterious from another’s point of view (Masson and McCarthy 1995, 22).

These remarks suggest a conception of the mind that is Cartesian. When emotions are construed as feelings they are characterized as mental events private to the subject who has them, accessible by introspection as the immediate objects of consciousness. Masson and McCarthy might say, for example, that while there are typical behavioral manifestations contingently associated with the emotion of anger, the subject can be angry without behaving in any of these typical ways, and the evidence for this is that the subject has certain conscious feelings or experiences of which she is immediately aware.³

There are reasons for doubting the correctness of the thesis that emotions are feelings. The most problematic feature of the definition of emotion offered by Masson and McCarthy is its lack of clarity. It is not particularly useful to analyze emotions as “what people refer to when they say ‘I feel sad’, or ‘I am happy’.” For it might be that people use these descriptions of emotional states to refer to mental states that are not feelings (as I will urge below), or that people are not specific about what they refer to when they use this language.

Consider two possible readings of the thesis that emotions are feelings: (a) Feelings are certain states of consciousness that are immediate

and unanalyzable—distinguished from sensory perceptions, beliefs, judgments, and other cognitive states. (b) Feelings are a complex of bodily sensations that differ from other sensations such as sleepiness, itches, and stomach aches, only in their relative complexity.⁴

There are difficulties with each interpretation of the feelings thesis. With respect to (b), one might wonder whether there is really a distinctive pattern of bodily sensations that is specific to each identifiable emotion. It is not likely that a subject can report on differences between bodily sensations in such a fine-grained way that will correspond to differences between fear, anger, envy, jealousy, and so forth. But even if we do not make it a requirement that subjects have privileged access to their bodily states, it is still implausible to suppose that a distinct set of sensations corresponds exactly to the wide range of emotions we identify in ourselves and others.⁵

Reading (a) of the thesis that emotions are feelings fares no better. The main criticism of this reading of the feelings thesis comes from the perspective of an evaluational theory of emotion. Critics argue that it will be difficult to differentiate emotions only on the basis of a “pure-feeling” element in cognition. For example, annoyance and indignation may feel similar, but these emotional states are distinguished by the subject on the basis of what she believes or knows about a situation. As Robert Solomon points out, distinguishing between embarrassment and shame does not depend on a feeling or sensation, but on the logic of the situation (Solomon 1993, 98). Embarrassment might be felt in a situation where the subject did nothing to bring about an untoward event, whereas shame is an emotion reserved for actions that a subject is responsible for bringing about. So differentiating between the emotions felt in a particular context is sometimes contingent on the subject’s judgment about her participatory role in that context. As Solomon reminds us, our language includes a wide range of evaluations and appraisals of our emotions. Emotions are judged reasonable or unreasonable, warranted or unwarranted, justifiable or not, legitimate, sensible, foolish, self-demeaning, and so on. In contrast, no such evaluations apply properly to feelings and sensations consisting of headaches, flushes, and tightness in the stomach. “It is never right or wrong to be nauseous” (Solomon 1993, 101).

For Solomon—and for many other contemporary philosophers writing on the emotions—the thesis that emotions are mere feelings or occurrences that happen beyond our control is entirely the wrong picture of the role that the emotions play in human lives. We are owed a more sophisti-

cated analysis of emotions than one that merely equates emotions with feelings.

Consider a second possible analysis of the emotions—one that is consistent with Solomon’s suggestion that emotions play an evaluative role in human lives. In the *Nicomachean Ethics* and in the *Rhetoric*, Aristotle is concerned with detailing the role that appropriate emotional responses play in moral virtue. If anger, for example, is experienced in the right proportion and at the right time, then anger is evidence of a virtuous character. The role that the emotions play in Aristotle’s moral theory requires a cognitive analysis of these psychological states.⁶ Specifically, the definition of anger includes the desire for revenge, accompanied by pain on account of an apparent slight to oneself or one’s own, where the slight is unjustified (*Rhetoric*, 1378a30–32). In the case of fear, Aristotle says that the efficient cause of fear is the thought of imminent danger (*Rhetoric*, 1382a21–22). The judgment that one has been unfairly wronged and the thought of imminent danger are not just contingently associated with these emotions, they constitute part of the essential definition of anger and fear, respectively. Aristotle’s analysis of the emotions found in the *Ethics* is representative of a contemporary collection of philosophical theories of the emotions that go by the name of “evaluative,” or “cognitive” theories.

While there are variations among evaluative theories, what these theories have in common is a complex analysis of the emotions that makes essential reference to a subject’s beliefs, judgments, knowledge, or cultural context. For example, William Lyons (1980) argues for a causal-evaluative theory of emotions where one central feature of this theory is that emotions are distinguished by their evaluative aspect. On this account, fear is partly analyzed by the subject’s judging that a situation she finds herself in is dangerous. W. George Turski (1994) argues that emotions play a rational role in lived experience. Emotions are “postures” or stances we adopt that reflect our engagement with the world. This contextual analysis locates the emotions in a human social and cultural setting. Alison Jaggar (1989), as well, characterizes the emotions as being primarily social constructions that reflect how a “whole person” is engaged in the language, culture, and values of his or her particular society.

Following Aristotle, suppose we characterize anger as essentially involving the judgment that one has been wronged. ‘Essentially’ here implies that without the presence of such a judgment the psychological state in question is not anger. There may be other features that constitute part of

the definition, for example, blood boiling around the heart, and the desire to return pain. Suppose a lion has blood boiling around the heart and chases a hyena away from its food in a menacing way. Then the psychological state in the lion resembles the psychological state we call anger in humans. Is it anger? We might be tempted to say so initially. But suppose the very property that fails to be present in the psychology of the lion is something corresponding to the judgment of wrongdoing. Then the psychological state of the lion is not anger, on the assumption that judgments are an essential ingredient in the analysis of anger in humans.

Though I have not argued so here, it may well turn out that the most plausible theory of emotions in humans is either an evaluative or social constructivist theory. Then it remains an open question whether or not animals have the relevant judgments, beliefs, knowledge, or cultural context required for the correct ascription of emotional states according to such a theory. My discussion of animal emotion is only a preliminary note to this kind of broader investigation. If we settle on an evaluative theory of emotion as the most viable for characterizing emotions as they occur in humans, then questions about the rationality of animals, and their ability to engage in more highly cognitive forms of thought, become central to determining whether or not they share emotions with humans. At the very least I hope I have shown that one needs to do more to establish the similarity between humans and animals than to merely announce that animals have emotions, where the nature of these states is left unanalyzed. The claim that animals share emotionality with humans is a philosophically interesting thesis, but one that should not depend on an uncritical or implausible theory of the emotions as these states figure in the lives of human beings.

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NOTES

1. Descartes specifically attributes to animals passions such as fear, joy, and anger. See Descartes 1970.

2. See Descartes 1978a, Article VI.
3. The authors suggest, additionally, that emotions may be unconscious (9–10). So it will be possible for a person to have emotions that she does not know about. This suggests that there is more to being angry, for example, than just having a feeling or sensation. If so, one wants to know what methods are available for identifying an emotional state as anger, sadness, and so on. Clearly, if such states are not knowable by direct and immediate introspection, there must be a more complex psychoanalytic procedure for so identifying them.
4. See Alston 1967.
5. In fact, the results of an experiment by Schacter and Singer (1962) suggest that one can induce different emotional states in people in cases where there are approximately the same physiological events occurring in their bodies.
6. Curiously, in Books 8 and 9 of the *History of Animals*, Aristotle quite freely attributes to animals a wide range of emotional states, and likens animals to humans in this regard. For a more detailed discussion of the emotions in Aristotle, see Fortenbaugh 1971 and 1975.

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